



Evaluation Methodologies Occasional Update
Department of Agricultural Education & Studies
Iowa State University

Primer on Participatory Evaluation

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Number 2 - July, 2001

Participatory Evaluation

Participatory evaluation can be a useful and important tool for developing organizational knowledge and strengthening institutional capacity. Those who utilize its techniques often find the approach useful for program improvement and accountability. Participatory evaluation is a collaborative approach to evaluation. In education, participatory evaluation calls for collaboration among those who share a common interest in program improvement and institutional and human resource development. Although participatory evaluation has a track record of successful use, it is still narrowly employed. We believe this approach can be fashioned to serve the needs of more programs in more situations than currently.

How is Participatory Evaluation Different?

Participatory evaluation contrasts with dominant forms of evaluation that emphasize managing rather than leading formal and non-formal programs. The approach also differs from conventional evaluation by what it values, or by 'what comes first.' In participatory evaluation, the professional evaluator provides opportunities for people to create their own meaning about what constitutes success for a given intervention, identify whom was affected differently, and explain meaningful changes that occurred.

Authentic participation of stakeholders increases quality of the data, and winnows remedies to those most likely to create lasting beneficial change. Finally, participation exercises democracy, and may contribute to positive social change. Conventional forms of evaluation are less likely to have these effects.

Common Themes

Any type of participatory evaluation must involve people, be useful to end-users, and be context specific, rooted in the concerns, interests, and problems of the people associated with the program. Primary to participatory evaluation is the extent to which stakeholders participate in posing questions and making sense of raw data. Their understanding will be deeper and more meaningful than if they were to only process someone else's interpretation. Participatory evaluation increases, through these activities, the likelihood of organizational utilization and

participation of legitimate stakeholders in conversations and decisions about the program's worth or merit, especially when voices that are often excluded from evaluation are fully involved (Greene, 1997).

Done well, this approach can turn program staff, participants, and others into evaluation enthusiasts rather than evaluation-avoiders, or worse, evaluation blockers. Participatory evaluation respects and uses the knowledge and experiences of key stakeholders. The evaluator shares power with people associated with or impacted by the program. All the while, the evaluator continuously and critically examines his or her own attitudes, ideas, and behaviors with respect to the people and the program being evaluated.

Methods

Participation does not direct the evaluation team to use any one type of method. Written surveys, interviews, focus groups, visual activities, roundtables and even skits are ways to conduct and present evaluations. However, the person acting as the professional evaluator (whether insider or outsider) usually provides leadership for seeing and describing multiple points of view, a skill that is enhanced by training in qualitative inquiry or humanistic psychology.

Implementation Challenges

Implementing participatory evaluations challenges evaluators and people involved in programs. This is especially true in organizations that have a low-democratic structure or climate. Another challenge is that stakeholder participation is difficult to sustain. Cousins and Whitmore (1998) suggest that the evaluator think about two key dimensions: stakeholder diversity, and depth of participation of stakeholders. Sometimes one is more possible to enhance than the other. It is counterproductive to imagine that each attempt at participatory evaluation will result in perfection. Further, there are no cookie-cutter models of participatory evaluation. Each project will be different in what it can accomplish in the way of authentic, meaningful participation.

Types and Styles

There are a variety of different types and styles of participatory evaluation. In an article called "Framing Participatory Evaluation," Bradley Cousins and Elizabeth Whitmore (1998) explore the meaning of participatory evaluation by distinguishing two key dimensions: practical functions and transformative (emancipatory) effects. Practical aspects of participatory evaluation foster evaluation utilization and benefit the people who have a vested interest in the evaluation findings. Often this means funders, directors, project staff, teachers, and facilitators. The emancipatory function of participatory evaluation provides greater opportunities for people to empower themselves through the evaluation process. Usually this means that clients or learners and other people affected by the program are included in managing the evaluation process in important ways. To accomplish this aspect, professional evaluators must relinquish certain leadership roles and stakeholders must uphold part of the process. Such strategies require the professional evaluator to give direction and support and also to foster autonomy--sometimes by simply staying out of the way. Transformative participatory evaluation not only increases people's capacities to carry out evaluation technically, but enhances their willingness and ability to identify political and social beliefs that contribute to social problems and restrict their imagination regarding solutions to longstanding problems.

Philosophical Roots

Participatory evaluation is consistent with the educational philosophy of constructivism. Constructivists understand reality as local and situational. Participatory evaluation also borrows ideas from Paulo Freire (1973), an adult educator who promoted transformative and emancipatory education. The ideas of Freire, recently deceased, might well endorse the notion that evaluation, like other activities in education, could liberate people by encouraging them to reflect critically on their experiences.

Who Can Succeed With This Approach?

Currently, lots of people evaluate programs in their role as external evaluators, internal evaluators, or (as the most of us) occasional evaluators or evaluator by default. No matter how one came to evaluation, participatory evaluation can be learned and applied by people acting in all sorts of capacities. There are two caveats.

First, participatory approaches succeed when a wider range of people – not just the evaluator -- takes the process seriously and attempts to genuinely collaborate. Therefore, by nature, evaluators can't do it all by themselves because they rely on others for the participatory outcome. The process isn't something the evaluator can completely control.

Second, participatory evaluation requires skills of systematic data gathering and interpretation just as do other approaches to evaluation. However, the need for process skills seems greater for people who direct participatory evaluations. Success with diagnosis of group dynamics and with facilitating cooperative team work increases the likelihood that the evaluator successfully moves a group into collaboration.

Are Jobs Available?

Regarding job opportunities, we are happy to report that at the 2000 annual meeting of the American Evaluation Association*, there was a call for students and field workers to be better trained in participatory evaluation, and for universities to share more of the responsibility for training. Extension, social service, education, health and community-based programs equally request evaluators with participatory evaluation experience. Usually, people seeking staff to work in the area of evaluation want participatory evaluation to be one of many approaches with which an applicant should be familiar.

Summary

The primary focus of participatory evaluation is to be educational and to build capacity, especially evaluation capacity, so stakeholders can control their future together. Most importantly, a participatory approach to program review is responsive to stakeholder needs and concerns and has a strong formative purpose intended for continuous improvement, not by ignoring diversity and power, but by making them part of the way we think about the merit and impact of educational programs.

Resources

Cousins, J. B. & Whitmore, E. (1998). Framing participatory evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation* [Special issue], 80, 5-22.

Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Seabury Press

Greene, J. (1997). Evaluation as advocacy. *Evaluation Practice*, 18(1), 25-35.

Acknowledgements: The authors appreciated critique from graduate students in the Spring 2001 course AgEdS 680X titled Participatory Evaluation Using Qualitative Inquiry.

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* <http://www.eval.org/>

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